

Growing With Books

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Book 1: Literature and Education

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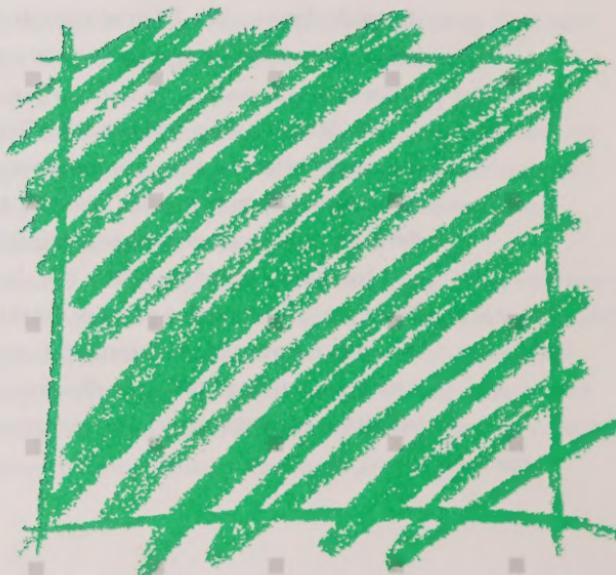


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Prologue:

What Stories Have to Do With Life



Prologue: What Stories Have to Do With Life

Lissa Paul

Relationships between literature, education, and life are always awkward to explore, but they are especially so now, when explicit information of questionable moral value is so easily available.

Children watch television programs containing scenes of sex and violence, but similar scenes in books are the cause of public outrage. Explicit classroom instructions on the dangers of strangers are sanctioned, yet similar literary accounts are condemned. So runs the scenario of our social schizophrenia: we believe in the need to warn children about potential social dangers, while we reject fictional accounts of such dangers as unsuitable for children.

Yet cultural truths presented in the context of stories, unlike those on the television news, are tempered by the mind and morality of the author. What we, as teachers, have to remember is that stories create a space where moral and social issues can be explored safely – without threat. And therein lies their value.

Both Gordon Wells and Johan Aitken understand very well where the truth of stories lies. Their articles are about the connections between literature and life and about how those connections can be made in the classroom.

In “Stories Are for Understanding” Gordon Wells demonstrates (especially in his transcripts of conversations between children), the two-way connection between literature and life. He shows how children develop the capacity to make stories lifelike – and to make life storylike.

In “Myth, Legend, and Fairy Tale: ‘Serious Statements About Our Existence’”, Johan Aitken explains the theoretical ground for the relationships between life and stories that are visible in Wells’s transcripts. Aitken looks thoughtfully and affectionately at how stories speak to the very heart of our humanity. Her easy grasp of Freudian, feminist, and

Marxist theories allows her to show how the injustices of society can be tempered through the “sustenance of imaginative art” and how archetypal stories provide the essence of our personal belief systems.

Wells and Aitken eloquently argue that stories are as essential to our humanity as breath itself. Stories, especially myths, legends, and fairy tales, are, in a way, as ephemeral as air, transmitted from the breath of one teller to the next. But stories are not as delicate as they seem.

As a case in point, a small group of Old English elegies, composed some time in the tenth century, comes to mind. They survived only by chance. Most Old English manuscripts – those that escaped being used to wrap up medieval garbage – were lost forever on October 23, 1731, in the fire that demolished the Cotton Library at Ashburnham House, Westminster, where the manuscripts were housed. Only about thirty thousand lines of Old English literature are extant today.

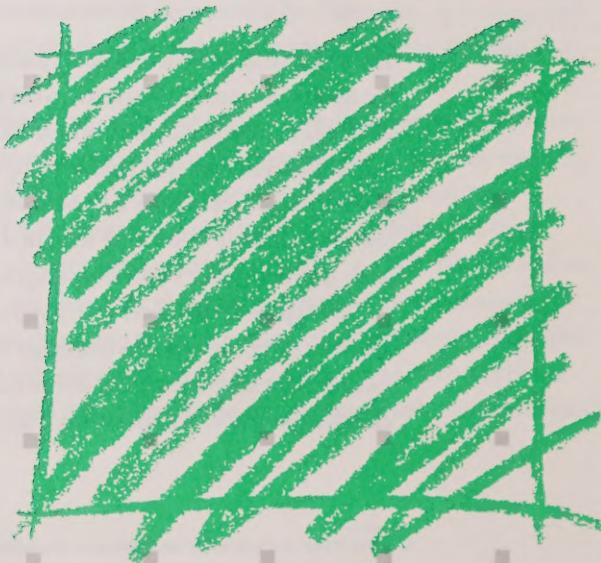
Several of the elegies tell of a lone minstrel's friendless wanderings through the hostile landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. In the poems, the decaying vestiges of ancient Roman roads and buildings that haunt that landscape become metaphors for personal isolation.

Still, within this desolation there is something very much alive, something conveyed in the language of the poems, something that still rings chillingly true – especially in “Deor”, where the wandering poet (whose name gives the poem its title) contemplates his own misery through a lens of other stories about decay.

Deor's lament, “Thaes ofereode; thisses swa maeg” (That has passed over; so may this) records the transitory nature of his own existence, and that of the material world. A thousand years later, Deor's lament still transmits the physical ache of his condition. The Roman ruins are still visible in the English countryside, a little more ruined than when Deor wandered through them. But the poet's words are as alive at this

moment as when they were written. The poignancy of his story touches us as sharply now (even though we receive it indirectly, in print, often in translation) as it must have touched the audience who first heard that poem carried on the breath of its author. It is the emotion carried in the words, the humanity, that binds us to him. And that connection is not ephemeral.

Stories Are for Understanding





Stories Are for Understanding

Gordon Wells

Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo ...

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.¹

So begins James Joyce's account of the development of a writer of stories: with a child seeing himself in a story that is itself nested within a narrative reconstruction of early childhood. My own interest in stories started in a rather similar way – as a listener to and reader of stories. However, instead of becoming a writer of stories, I became a researcher trying to understand the significance of stories for the development of literacy. A very different concern – or so it seemed to me then.

The Development of Storying

The first clue in what in retrospect seems rather like a detective story was the finding of a positive association between ease in learning to read and write and the frequency with which the children I had been studying had stories read to them.² Following up this finding, I began to look more carefully at the recordings we had made of children at home, in order to see whether there were other ways in which stories played a part in their lives. And here Joyce's opening paragraphs offered a further clue.

By beginning his novel with a vignette of family life organized around a story, Joyce points (although not necessarily consciously) to the fundamental significance that stories have as organizers of the young child's experience. Without some organizing principle, the kaleidoscope

1. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth, Mx.: Penguin, 1960), p. 7.
2. G. C. Wells, "Pre-school Literacy Related Activities and Success in School", in *Literacy, Language and Learning*, ed. D. Olson et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

of people, objects, and events that succeed each other in a child's life must remain fragmentary, unconnected, and essentially meaningless. Like the thread that links a collection of separate stones and makes them into a necklace, a "story" links events together in a narrative sequence and gives them coherence and significance.

In the first year or two of life there is little overt evidence of this active "storying"³ – though that should not lead us to suppose that it is not taking place. Even before children have acquired the resources for conversation their experience is providing examples of some of the most basic narrative motifs: cause and effect seen in actions and their consequences; intentions formed and achieved or thwarted; hunger, pain, and separation experienced and then alleviated through the loving ministrations of others. As they make these connections between events children are establishing the basis for their own inner storying – that is to say the narrative schemas or frames they will use to make sense of their experience. Then, as they become able to comprehend the speech of others, they hear these same motifs expressed in the comments, questions, and explanations of others and have their own inner storying validated and extended.

As the child grows older, though, there begins to be more direct evidence of the interpretive and shaping power of story as, in conversation, he or she attempts to recount experiences to others. At first these accounts tend to be limited to events in which the listener was also involved and are often prompted by an adult – e.g., "Tell Daddy what we did today."⁴ Only later is the child able to tell about events in which the listener did not share, and this may require considerable adult assistance if the original impulse to link events in a narrative structure is to be carried to a successful conclusion. In the following example, Mark provides

³ I use this term to mean the activity of constructing stories in the mind, whether in language or in some other mode of representation.

⁴ M. A. K. Halliday, *Learning How to Mean* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975).

the series of (imaginary) events; but it is only with his mother's helpful interjections that he is able to construct the narrative sequence.

Mark (aged two years and one month) is looking out of the window. He had previously seen a man working in the garden opposite.

MARK: Where man gone?

Where man gone?

MOTHER: I don't know.

I expect he's gone inside because it's snowing.

MARK (*said at a higher pitch*): Where man gone?

MOTHER: In the house.

MARK: Uh?

MOTHER: In the house.

MARK: No.

No.

Gone to shop, Mummy.

(*The local shop is close to Mark's house.*)

MOTHER: Gone where?

MARK: Gone shop.

MOTHER: To the shop?

MARK: Yeh.

MOTHER: What's he going to buy?

MARK: Er – biscuits.

MOTHER: Biscuits, mm.

MARK: Uh?

MOTHER: Mm. What else?

MARK: Er – meat.

MOTHER: Mm.

MARK: Meat.

Er – sweeties.

Buy a big bag sweets.

MOTHER: Buy sweets?

MARK: Yeh.

M – er – man buy – the man buy sweets.

MOTHER: Will he?

MARK: Yeh.

Daddy buy sweets.

Daddy buy sweets.

MOTHER: Why?

MARK: Oh – er – shop.

Mark do buy some – sweet – sweeties.

Mark buy some – um – I did.

By the age of four or five most children are able to manage the narration by themselves, and some are able to tell quite long and involved stories, provided they have an interested audience.⁵ More often, however, we first see this ability emerging in their imaginative play, either alone or with other children.⁶

In the following example, Sam, John, and David are playing with a varied set of play people and animals. David has a cardboard box: this is his "base". Sam also has his own territory: a wooden boat, on which he has a family of lions. All around is the sea – the playroom carpet. At this point in their play, John, who also has a boat and an assortment of play people, is torn between joining David on his base or Sam on his boat. The problem is that neither base nor boat has sufficient room for all of John's people. As each child contributes from his own imaginary world, it is the jointly constructed narrative line that enables them to integrate those worlds in a collaborative manner and to manage the interpersonal conflicts that so often arise in the course of play. (*Note:* in the following dialogue, utterances in italics are spoken in "play" voices appropriate to the characters concerned.)

5. C. G. Wells, *The Meaning Makers* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 197-98.

6. See, for example, "Narrative Play in Second Language Learning", in H. K. Chin and S. B. Heath, *The Language Play* (Norwood, N.J. : Ablex, 1986).

SAM (to John, to take his play people somewhere else): Now you have to live on your boat.

DAVID (to self): 'Tend it was put down like that (arranging his base).

JOHN (to Sam): Why? Why do we?

SAM: 'Cos there was no room for you (on his boat).

(David puts people, furniture, etc., into his base.)

JOHN: Pretend we was sending boats back (moves Sam's boat with the lions on).

SAM (speaking as lions): *No, that's our boat! That's our boat!*

JOHN: No, but pretend we was sav – saving them back so people could get, um – (to David, who has got in the way) That was your fault.

SAM: *Okay, we're living on here* (on the boat).

Ob, we'll die.

(John begins to put his people on David's base.)

DAVID: We – we've got all the luggage. *I'm going to sleep.* (Pretends to cry.) All our luggage is – is – One of, er – one of our boyfriends is crying in a corner (pretends to cry). Pretend one of the – the – their children was crying in a corner (pretends to cry).

SAM: Why was that?

DAVID: It was because they didn't like being on the – (pretends to cry).

SAM: They didn't like being on land.

DAVID: – all squashed up, did they?

SAM: No, they didn't like being –

DAVID: They went outside, didn't they?

SAM: Yes, and they had to go out. And it was poison on the sea and they had to die, didn't they?

JOHN: No, they didn't. They got on this boat (the lion's boat).

They jumped on to there. They was good jumpers.

Although the reader of this extract probably has some difficulty in following the thread, the children clearly had none. Even when their suggestions were in conflict, they listened to each other's contributions to

the jointly constructed story and modified their actions in ways that were mutually acceptable. One interesting feature of this particular example is the use of the past tense in those utterances that develop the narrative. It is as if the children know that, to be recounted, the actions must already have happened, and it is tempting to see in this the influence of the stories they have heard, for all three boys were frequently read to. The effects of this familiarity with stories are apparent in the range of roles they are able to take on and in the understanding they show of the thoughts and feelings of their imaginary characters.

The same is equally true of course as, a little later, children begin to learn to read and to start writing stories themselves. The quality of their experience as listeners to other people's stories and the richness of their own storying in dramatic play are a major influence on the ease with which they learn to make sense of print and on the quality of the stories they compose themselves. Those who have heard how written stories sound are quicker to recognize these characteristic uses of language when they meet them in the books they read and gain control over them more readily in their own writing. However, even without this advantage, every child has an ability to create stories, which will manifest itself, if only we provide encouragement and the conditions in which it can flourish.⁷

The Deeper Significance of Stories

So far, I have tried briefly to trace the development of storying through the Primary years and to show how stories provide a natural entry into literacy. But as I was working on this material I read an article by Richard Gregory, an eminent neuropsychologist, that extended my understanding of the significance of storying very considerably. A particularly intriguing aspect of the article is Gregory's emphasis on "brain fictions" as a

⁷. D. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1982).

unifying concept for explaining the diversity of human mental activities.⁸ In perceiving objects in the world, for example, we interpret incoming sense data by constructing from past experience a framework, or fiction, in terms of which the data make sense. In research in the natural sciences, too, the interpretation of evidence depends crucially on theory, which, although more abstract and more general, is another form of fiction.

Put in slightly different terms, what Gregory seemed to be arguing was that storying was a much more central characteristic of the human response to experience than I had previously recognized. And, thinking along these lines, I recalled the distinction that James Britton had drawn between the two roles of participant and spectator in human affairs.⁹ In the participant role, he has argued, we are concerned to get things done, to achieve our purposes; in the spectator role, however, when we are temporarily removed from the arena of action, we reflect on what has happened, recasting events in the shape of a story in order to perceive and savour their significance. Britton's interest was in language and in the different functions it performs: as a form of action in the participant role and as an organizer of reflection in the role of spectator.¹⁰ Although, as Gregory has shown, the brain can construct fictions and use them to guide actions without recourse to language, it is clear that the availability of language immensely enhances the power of these fictions by enabling us to capture them for conscious consideration and reworking and to share these processes with others.

Could it indeed be that it is in storying that language makes its most basic contribution to thinking, by providing the symbols and structures from which our stories – narratives, interpretations, and theories – are constructed? This is certainly one way of understanding the significance

8. R. Gregory, "Psychology: Towards a Science of Fiction", *New Society* (23 May, 1974), pp. 439-41.
9. J. Britton, *Prospect and Retrospect* (London: Heinemann, 1982).
10. "Writing and the Story World", in J. Britton, *Explorations in the Development of Writing* (Chichester, England: John Wiley, 1983).

that is attributed to language, for example, by the writers of the Bullock Report, as can be seen if we mentally substitute "story" for "symbol" in the following quotation:

Man's individual, social and cultural achievements can be rightly understood only if we take into account that he is essentially a symbol-using animal. By this account what makes us typically human is the fact that we symbolize, or represent to ourselves, the objects, people and events that make up our environment, and do so cumulatively, thus creating an inner representation of the world as we have encountered it. The accumulated representation is on the one hand a storehouse of past experience and on the other a body of expectations regarding what may yet happen to us. In this way we construct for ourselves a past and a future, a retrospect and a prospect; all our significant actions are performed within this extended field or framework, and no conscious act, however trivial, is uninfluenced by it.¹¹

Seen from this perspective, storying is a basic form of mental activity – perhaps *the* distinctively human one – and one that is pre-eminently carried on through the medium of language. Furthermore, the products of this activity are clearly not limited to the stories that are read or told to us by other people. We each of us carry on a continuous "storying" in our own heads, as we attempt to relate events to a story framework in order to interpret them and use the same frameworks to plan ways of realizing our intentions in the future. "Making sense" of something is thus to a very great extent being able to make up a plausible story about it.

Reassessing the importance of stories in young children's development from this present vantage point, we can now see that the stories that are told to children and acted out in the routines of their everyday lives support and enrich the threads of their inner storying to provide them with a framework of interpretation within which they fashion their understanding of the world and, through understanding, come to be able to control it. And from this it is a short step to the recognition

11. A. Bullock et al., *A Language for Life: Report of the Committee of Inquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975), p. 47.

that, for each of us, the reality we inhabit is to a very great extent a distillation of the stories that we have shared: not only the narratives that we have heard and told, read or had read to us, or seen enacted in drama or on television, but also the anecdotes, explanations, and conjectures that are drawn upon in everyday conversation in our perpetual attempts to understand who we are and where we're going.

Storying Across the Curriculum

With this enhanced understanding of the fundamental significance of storying I began to look at the place of stories in school and in education more generally. What I found was that, beyond the primary years, stories received little official recognition except in the literature class. School is for learning about the "real" world, and stories are perceived by most teachers as frivolous and pupils' personal anecdotes as annoying and irrelevant interruptions of the official matter of the curriculum. Stories are all very well for preschoolers and for learning to read and write, the argument goes, but once the skills of literacy have been acquired the emphasis should shift to facts, to real-world knowledge and the subject disciplines in terms of which that knowledge is organized. Such a view, I now believe, is fundamentally mistaken, and in this final section I wish to challenge the main assumptions on which it is based and to argue instead for a recognition of the importance of stories right across the curriculum.

The first mistake is in assuming that the imaginative and affective response to experience is of less value than the practical and analytic or, indeed, in thinking that they are in competition with each other. A fully mature response is one that achieves a balance of the practical, the moral, and the aesthetic. To help students to achieve such a balance should be the concern of all teachers, whatever the curriculum content for which they are responsible. This is fast becoming apparent with

respect to science and technology: unless our students learn to respond to scientific knowledge in a balanced manner there is little hope that their world will remain worth inhabiting. But the same need for a balanced approach to knowledge applies equally in other subjects. In all areas of the curriculum, stories have a major role to play, in the form of biographies, historical novels, newspaper and magazine features, and so on, and, of course, in the stories that students bring in speech or writing from their own experience.

A second mistaken assumption concerns the simple opposition that is often drawn between "fact" and "fiction": that the former is true while the latter is largely unreliable and irrelevant. Quite apart from the difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between the two, this assumption oversimplifies the complex manner in which fact and fiction are interrelated in all branches of knowledge. As Gregory has shown, in the article previously cited, the facts with which most subjects of the curriculum are concerned are facts only within the framework of some theory. Theories, then, share many of the imaginative, "as if" characteristics of fiction. Moreover, as theories change through radical reconceptualizations of a particular subject matter, the interpretation of the relevant facts alters too. On the other hand, the stories that are classed as fiction are rarely far removed from the "facts" of everyday experience: the characters have hopes and intentions, and their actions have consequences, just as in real life. To be believable the action must take place within a possible world that is governed by the same sort of consistent laws as we believe operate in the "real" world. In sum, the relationship between "fact" and "fiction" is much less straightforward than is often assumed to be the case.

In more humorous vein, Rosen makes a related and equally serious point when he claims:

If you aspire to becoming an invertebrate paleontologist you must be someone given to storytelling. What is geology but a vast story which geologists have been composing and revising

throughout the existence of their subject? Indeed what has the recent brouhaha about evolution been but two stories competing for the right to be the authorized version, the authentic story, a macro-narrative. There are stories wherever we turn. How do we understand foetal development except as a fundamental story in which sperm and ovum triumph at the dénouement of parturition? Every chemical reaction is a story compressed into the straitjacket of an equation. Every car speeds down the road by virtue of that well-known engineer's yarn called the Ottocycle.¹²

If theories are "macro-narratives", similar in many respects to the stories that we class as fiction, what about the ways in which theories are constructed and knowledge is built up? Is that not too a form of storying – both in the successive contributions of different thinkers to an intellectual discipline (for example, the progression in physics from Galileo to Newton to Einstein) and in the development of the understanding of any particular thinker? And so we return to the point with which we started: the role of stories and storying in the development of each individual.

It is readily accepted that young children find it easier to assimilate new ideas when those ideas are presented within the framework of a story. Only gradually do children move from the particularized example to the principle. However, even older students find that illustrative anecdotes make general principles easier to grasp and, given the opportunity, they will frequently look for such anecdotal examples in their own experience as they talk through new ideas in the attempt to make the connection between "academic" knowledge and the "action" knowledge of everyday life. Rather than treat such storying as irrelevant, therefore, we should encourage it, recognizing that, as Rosen puts it:

- a) Inside every non-narrative kind of discourse there stalk the ghosts of narrative, and
- b) inside every narrative there stalk the ghosts of non-narrative discourse.¹³

12. "The Nurture of Narrative", in Harold Rosen, *Stories and Meanings* (London: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1984), p. 16.

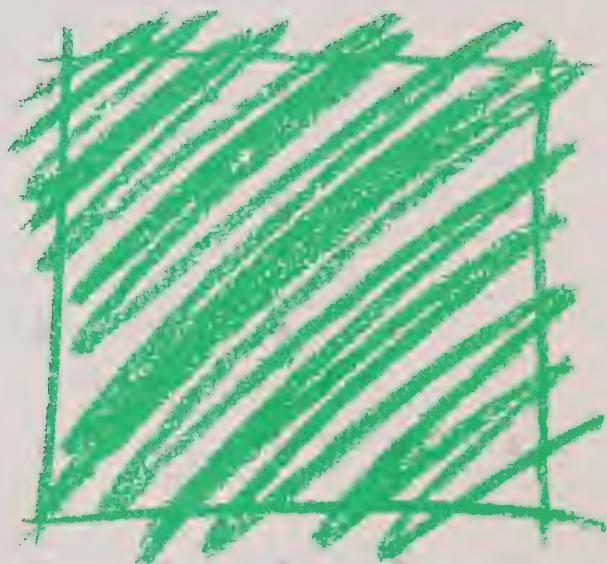
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Of course it is important that students should come to understand the difference between the two modes and be able to handle them both effectively. But the best route to the achievement of the more abstract and decontextualized formulation is likely, both developmentally and in the tackling of each new problem, to take them through the domain of stories, their own and other people's. Certainly this is the course I have followed in arriving at my present understanding.

If, as I have tried to show, storying is indeed the most fundamental way of grappling with new experience, we should be prepared to recognize the value of stories and encourage them at all stages of development. Right across the curriculum, storying provides a major route to understanding.

Myth, Legend, and Fairy Tale:

"Serious Statements About Our Existence"





*Myth, Legend, and Fairy Tale: “Serious Statements About Our Existence”*¹

Johan Lyall Aitken

The Territory Defined

There was a boy who used to sit in the twilight and listen to his great-aunt's stories.

She told him that if he could reach the place where the end of the rainbow stands he would find there a golden key.

“And what is the key for?” the boy would ask. “What is it the key of? What will it open?”

“That nobody knows,” his aunt would reply. “He has to find that out.”

“I suppose, being gold,” the boy once said, thoughtfully, “that I could get a good deal of money for it if I sold it.”

“Better never find it than sell it,” returned his aunt.

And then the boy went to bed and dreamed about the golden key.

Now all that his great-aunt told the boy about the golden key would have been nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland. For it is perfectly well known that out of Fairyland nobody can ever find where the rainbow stands. The creature takes such good care of its golden key, always flitting from place to place, lest anyone should find it! But in Fairyland it is quite different. Things that look real in this country look very thin indeed in Fairyland, while some of the things that here cannot stand still for a moment, will not move there. So it was not in the least absurd of the old lady to tell her nephew such things about the golden key.²

As Elizabeth Cook observes:

In rough and ready phrasing myths are about gods, legends are about heroes, and fairy tales are about woodcutters and princesses.... Critics take an endless interest in the finer differences between them, but the common reader is more struck by the ways in which they all look rather like each other, and indeed merge into one another.³

1. Isak Dinesen, in J. Yolen, *Touch Magic* (New York: Philomel, 1981), p. 18.

2. G. MacDonald, *The Golden Key* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 1-3.

3. E. Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 1.

A glance at my bookshelf reveals the following titles: *Myths and Fairy Tales*, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, *Myths and Legends*, *Folk and Fairy Tales*, and *Legends and Folk Tales*. I know from my close association with the innards of these collections that little or no differentiation is made regarding the type of the tale. "Cinderella", for example, is included without ceremony or comment in collections of myths, of legends, of fairy tales, and of folk tales, indicating that the proverbial common reader is not the only one who is "struck by the ways in which [these tales] look rather like each other".

My emphasis will be upon tales "merging into one another". Common denominators will be stressed. While there are many collectors, compilers, collaborators, revisionists, editors, and such involved in the literary and book production of these stories, the tales are all traditional in the sense that they either have no precise authorship much later than the time of Homer, or, as in the case of Andersen and Wilde, they follow a carefully circumscribed pattern and shape. These traditional tales cross the bridge from reality to fantasy in order to make what Isak Dinesen has called "serious statements about our existence".⁴ They are about our deepest fears – our nightmares – and about our highest hopes – our dreams. Their genius "gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives."⁵

The Territory Under Siege

It may seem misguided pedagogy to look unflinchingly at the case against the genre I consider most fabulous and fertile and which I shall be advocating for use as either the foundation of the language arts or English program or the centre, depending upon how one prefers to

4. See footnote 1.

5. C. S. Lewis, in an introduction to *Phantastes and Lilith*, by George MacDonald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdman, 1964), p. 10.

design curriculum. However, a contemporary apology for myth would be dishonest and ephemeral if it did not take into account the challenge of much current criticism to what Jane Yolen calls children's "birthright: the myths, fairy tales, fantasies and folklore that are their proper legacy".⁶ "Why," queries Ursula Le Guin, "are we so afraid of dragons?"⁷

While many teachers may agree that "myth, legend and fairy tale are the only basics worth getting back to",⁸ many do not. Even those who do cannot be unaware of or unaffected by the clangor and often convincing challenges to their use of this material in schools, libraries, and story-telling festivals. The charge is rarely, if ever, based exclusively upon aesthetic or literary criteria: it is usually based primarily upon analysis of content and a particular vision or interpretation of that content. There are many theorists – political, sexual, sociological, psychological, to name a few – who from their own perspectives have questioned the wisdom of sharing myth, legend, and fairy tale with children. They seem to have forgotten, temporarily at least, that "works of literature are not things to be contemplated but powers to be absorbed."⁹

Many political theorists demonstrate this kind of amnesia when, for example, they see myth and fairy tale as tools of subversion, and legend as a perpetuation of racial stereotyping. All the arts have been repeatedly assailed as harbingers of capitalist decadence, revolutionary fervour, bourgeois thought, fascist imperialism, and so on. Jack Zipes argues effectively in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* that such was the case in Germany at the time of the rise of the Third Reich.¹⁰ The present-day Marxist charge of elitism in myth is also important to consider. There is an undeniable preponderance of royalty in fairy tales, and of gods in myth. As Robertson Davies ponders in his review of Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*: "And what about all those kings and queens and princes and princesses? Where do they fit into the life of the child

6. J. Yolen, *Touch Magic*, p. 14.

7. U. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), p. 39.

8. J. Aitken, "Making It New", *Indirections* (September 1983), p. 21.

9. N. Frye, "Expanding the Boundaries of Literature" (unpublished paper, 1984).

10. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Wildman Press, 1983).

who has been suckled on the chemical pap of fake republicanism and fake democracy?" There is stress upon ultimate harmony, although strangely enough, some of the tales are profoundly revolutionary. These are genuine concerns. Sexism is another of the charges that must be taken seriously.

For the unknown goddess

Lady, the unknown goddess,
we have prayed long enough only
to Yahweh the thunder god.

Now we should pray to you again
goddess of a thousand names and faces
Ceres Venus Demeter Isis
Inanna Queen of Heaven
or by whatever name
you would be known

you who sprang from the sea
who are present in the moisture of love
who live in the humming cells
of all life
who are rain
with its million soft fingers

and you who are earth
you with your beautiful ruined face
wrinkled by all
that your children have done to you

sunlike lady
crowned with the whirling planets.

Lady of peace, of good counsel,
of love, of wisdom

we invoke your name
which we no longer know

and pray to you
to restore our humanity
as we restore your divinity!"

11. Elizabeth Brewster, "For the unknown goddess", in *In Search of Eros* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1974), p. 51. Used by permission of Irwin Publishing Inc.

Feminist theorists have pointed to what many consider a rigid portrayal of sex and age roles in myth, legend, and fairy tale. One cannot help but share the frustration of Liv, a mother in middle life, a travel agent, and someone who, as her professor husband says, “does all the business in our house, everything down to having the cars serviced”, when she angrily retorts, “I don’t care about Venus or Mars or Vulcan! What about Mars’ wife?”¹² That certain tales rendered in versions dictated by a patriarchal society reinforce the already dominant refrain in education of “see Dick run, see Jane sit” is undeniable. Jennifer Waelti-Walters claims that:

fairy tales teach girls to accept at least a partial loss of identity, and thus endanger all the relationships in which they must take part in a lifetime. These relationships are further jeopardized by the fact that the same tales transmit to boys an overt possessor/object, master/slave relationship pattern, the playing out of which will reinforce the self-destructive, victim pattern of behaviour taught to girls.¹³

When examining Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Belles Images*, Waelti-Walters sees the protagonist Laurence, whose role has been that of subservient female, as achieving:

an integrated self and a sense of her own worth. She will not be tormented by the loss of “femininity” that comes with age. Her sense of self is no longer dependent upon her market value as a decorative object gracing her husband’s collection. Reflecting nobody, she need fear no rival in her mirror. The queen who will not kill is not dead.¹⁴

It is generally rewarding to identify fairy-tale patterns throughout literature, and what Waelti-Walters detects in *Les Belles Images* is the reflection of a common fairy-tale motif.

12. R. Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), p. 33.

13. J. Waelti-Walters, *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1982), pp. 7-8.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Psychological interpretations of myth, legend, and fairy tale provide a curious mixture of opinion and well-developed theory, of ideology run rampant and thoughtful, well-supported analysis. Sometimes when a theorist is intimate with psychological insights but has only a nodding acquaintance with literature the results can be bizarre: not only words, it seems, but stories as well can mean anything we want them to mean. In Tom Lehrer's satiric couplet:

I can tell you things about Peter Pan
And the Wizard of Oz – there's a dirty old man.¹⁵

Freudian, neo-Freudian, and Jungian theories of "Little Red Riding Hood" can make a mere mortal feel that she has been either terribly retarded or frightfully repressed, or both, to have missed all that was going on right under (or somewhere under) her very nose! Much of this theory, however, must be taken to heart as well as head, for it speaks to us of the nourishing, healing, and sustaining aspects of myth, legend, and fairy tale, and will not be denied. As that most influential crusader for traditional lore, Bruno Bettelheim, advises:

The deep inner conflicts originating in our primitive drives and our violent emotions are all denied in much of modern children's literature, and so the child is not helped in coping with them....

The fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death. Further, the fairy tale offers solutions in ways that the child can grasp on his level of understanding.¹⁶

Many Jungian and many humanistically inclined Freudian scholars advocate teaching myth, legend, and fairy tale, and we have need of their illuminations in our own reflection and study. These scholars become part

15. T. Lehrer, *That Was the Year That Was*, LP Record, Reprise 6179.

16. B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 10.

of the siege upon the territory only when they cease, in Tolkien's words, to read myth, legend, and fairy tale as "tales" and insist upon studying them as "curios".¹⁷

One feature common to all detractors and dislocators of myth, legend, and fairy tale is their obvious conviction as to the power of these traditional tales. If they wish to banish them from education, as Plato did the poets from his Republic, they are acknowledging, as he did, that literature is pretty potent stuff. The second feature of those who would lay siege to the territory or subvert it to their own narrow purposes is a profound confusion, not generally experienced by children, between the imaginative worlds created by myth, legend, and fairy tale and the rather more mundane and limited "real" world in which, for most of our lives, we must move and have our being.

The Territory Defended

Elizabeth Cook sagely concludes that:

the fixed point of a myth or a fairy tale lies in its own concrete nature; not in any of the things that it suggests to different readers, and not in its conjectural origins.¹⁸

Then, reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss, she adds: "A myth is everything that it has been and everything that it may become."¹⁹

I shall now proceed to a defence of the turf Jane Yolen has identified as rightfully belonging to children – and to all humankind who, as T. S. Eliot several times reminds us, "cannot bear very much reality".

There are many serious schools of criticism which are purposefully and productively, like tigers at the gate, forcing the scholar/teacher to re-examine myth, legend, and fairy tale for use in school. For purposes of

17. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Children and Fairy Stories", in *Only Connect*, ed. S. Egoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 111.

18. E. Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous*, p. 3.

19. Ibid., p. 3.

symmetry and brevity and also because they are among the most penetrating and influential, I shall deal with the three already mentioned: Marxist, feminist, and Freudian. The three schools also combine and conjoin in many instances, but I shall leave the reader to consider them in concert. It is quite difficult enough to respond to them individually.

A little girl, kneeling and painting on a large canvas spread out on the floor – in a position only a four-year-old can assume with grace and comfort – splashing about great gobbs of blue paint and chatting to her neighbour, comments: “I used to be really scared of my dad, like, you know, he was a king or something.”

The language of fairy tale is helping this child describe the already-deposed monarch of her *ménage*. Parents and, alas, sometimes teachers, in their apparent omnipotence, are the queens and kings of early childhood. Myth, legend, and fairy tale give us assurance that we will grow up, that we will get out from under, that our turn will come.

Even when children and adults make every effort to live in a collective of equals, the adults simply are, for a time, physically larger and significantly more worldly wise. Without seeking any dirty dominance or sickly submission, they are perceived by children as queens and kings of their castles, however puny and poverty-ridden those structures may be.

That there is a great deal of social mobility in tales one must admit. There is a good deal of movement from rags to riches as reward for goodness, courage, or cunning. The implications are certainly there in many traditional tales that satins and fine houses are more desirable than draughty thatched-roofed cottages and oatmeal once a day. The same “message”, more cruelly and crassly presented, is everywhere in our society without the balance of justice and the sustenance of imaginative art. The symbolism is rarely lost upon children who care, above all, for the yarn. To be a queen or a king is to be in control of one’s life – something all children both yearn for...and dread. Any adult attempting to

use any course or content in the service of any ideology is no longer providing genuine education. Genuine education raises questions: it never provides pat answers. The intention of the teacher is all-important. If the intention is to tell a tale of magic upon which the starving imagination can feed and thrive, well and good. There is, as Stanley Fish observes, never any single text in any class.²⁰ This (Marxist) critic is helpful, however, in warning of the potential danger when any content is deliberately subverted for ideological purposes.

The feminist charge of sharply drawn and rigidly defined sex roles in myth, legend, and fairy tale cannot be dealt with until a number of points have been conceded. "He is to purvey and she is to smile," as Jane Austen said, is what the message-hunter may find. But there are other ways of interpreting tales than as paradigms for sexual modelling.

We are all a combination of Penelope and Ulysses in varying proportions and at various times of the year and of our lives. In the spring, for example, "thanen longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" – we yearn for the open road; perhaps, like Molly Bloom, for a new companion each spring – but as Chaucer knew, any excuse will do when the fit is on. Very few of the group in his tales have as their sole motive "the hooly blisful martir for to seke".

In the winter some of us, Ulysses-like, head for the hills, since the Aegean is not handy, but many of us feel with Eliot that while spring disturbs, winter protects, and the Penelope in us who loves hearth and home predominates. A quick survey of one's acquaintances will reveal many female Ulysseans and many male Penelopeans. And why not? All the evidence is not in, at any rate, as far as sex-role identification in response to story is concerned and we may be permitted some healthy scepticism.

That myth, legend, and fairy tale have been twisted to suit the purposes of patriarchy is no doubt accurate enough, but these tales have no

20. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

monopoly on this tendency in the school curriculum. Revisionist criticism is necessary but vision is also helpful. We may not applaud theft, murder, and generally taking the initiative (Gretel does all three in a tale in which her older brother spends most of his time in a cage) but they can scarcely be called passive tactics. While Zeus can triumph over Hera, she manages to make life difficult in return, and many other goddesses enjoy pushing gods – to say nothing of mere mortals – all over the place.

Betty Booker of "Betty Booker's Bridle" is definitely in charge of everything, from Skipper Perkins on. Ruth leaves her own country and people to go away with her mother-in-law to a new land. It is her choice, and it works out well. Search as I might, I have never found Mr. Pig, and Ms. Pig has been bringing up those three little ones and sending them off to seek their fortunes since the tale began.

Bettelheim, who stands accused by Marxists, feminists, and fellow Freudians, is still going strong. One of his most "useful" observations is that myth, legend, and fairy tale provide the child with a "rich and variegated fantasy life ... which can help prevent his imagination from getting stuck within the narrow confines of a few anxious or wish-fulfilling day-dreams circling around a few narrow preoccupations".²¹ Bettelheim himself is not in favour of providing children with the framework some psychoanalytic theory has unearthed in the tales. One can only hope that teachers agree with him on this point and are not going to foist adult self-consciousness upon children any earlier than it will come of its own accord. Cook's observations on the subject are worth quoting:

A reader who takes his eyes off the story that is in front of him, and looks for something else behind it, will eventually see nothing but the theories he would have held whether he had read the story or not. To a reader who is attending to stories as they are, and above all to a child hearing them for the first time, Hades "means" anything and everything he knows that can be described by the words dark, cold, misty, formless".²²

21. B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 119.

22. E. Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous*, p. 4.

The many variations of the tales and the changes, to and fro, from sad endings to happy ones and from just deserts to abundant mercy, attest to roles adult anxieties have always played in controlling and shaping what children hear and read.

In one era, for example, the gingerbread man is eaten up; in another, he becomes a gingerbread boy and is of the lineage of Isaac and Pinocchio – the child of aged people, who long for progeny. In this version, the gingerbread boy does not get eaten up. He has a narrow escape and runs home to the little old man and right into the waiting arms of the little old woman. We get two very different creation stories in Genesis, and the genealogy of gods and goddesses on Olympus is often impossible to disentangle. I refer not only to shafts of sunlight, swans and such, but also to conflicting versions of who, for example, sired Persephone.

In “The Three Bears” the old woman/witch – the interloper who eats food and sleeps on beds that belong to others and is duly punished – gives way to Goldilocks, a naturally inquisitive, amoral little girl who somehow turns the story around and makes the bears villains in their own house because they don’t much approve of her antics.

The stories of Arthur are so varied that in some he has a slight footing in history and in others has his feet firmly planted not only at the head of the Round Table but squarely in the middle of story. The Trickster of Indian legend not only has “logically” incompatible guises and adventures, he also, according to researchers, may have originally hailed from different locales.

As George MacDonald reminded us, all this would have been nonsense if it were not taking place in an imaginary spot on “the borders of Fairyland”. These infinite adaptations, coupled with the fact that myth, legend, and fairy tale can sustain and survive them, indicate the amazing fertility of the tales themselves and their virtually indestructible shape.

An Explorer's Guide

In *Touch Magic*, Jane Yolen declares that "an understanding of, a grounding in, a familiarity with the old lores and wisdoms of the so-called dead worlds is . . . a basic developmental need".²³ Yolen is an excellent guide for a tour of the territory of enchantment. After following in her footsteps through *Touch Magic* we can never return to the isolated and insulated Grade 9 course in mythology. It was too little, too late. It had high hopes, but unless the students had had much previous exposure to the genre at home or in libraries it was almost doomed to failure.

Now we find that Northrop Frye's comment on the King James Version of the Bible – "[it] should be taught so early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind, where everything that comes along later can settle on it"²⁴ – is no less appropriate to myth, legend, and fairy tale.

Myth, legend, and fairy tale can – as Yolen emphasizes, provide first of all a "landscape of allusion". This is perhaps the crudest of the apologies for myth, legend, and fairy tale as basics in our contemporary curriculum, but an essential one nonetheless.

It is simply impossible to read current literature or decipher popular advertising without intimate familiarity with the dialect of the tribe, and this dialect, of course, is based upon our ancient tales. Who was the mighty Hercules before his dislocated form flashed upon our television screens? Who were Mary and Martha, and why have contemporary feminists found them such apt examples of certain kinds of roles imposed upon womankind? Why is the beloved disciple a possible entry for homosexuals in their need to find identity in the holy writ of Western culture? Doubting Thomases and irresistible Helens surround us, and we desperately need names for them if we are to understand them and their impotence or power.

23. J. Yolen, *Touch Magic*, p. 15.

24. N. Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Publications, 1963), p. 46.

Since the English or language arts program eventually expands to include the total verbal experience of the student, it is not only for the purposes of understanding poets from Blake to Ted Hughes or novelists from Dickens to Timothy Findley that students need familiarity with literary code.

Sylvia Fraser's novel *The Candy Factory* includes a scene in which a secretary called Eve throws her apple core in the nearest waste basket; Judith Finlayson, writing about feminism in the *Globe and Mail*, needs Pandora's box to make her point; Linus Pauling (of Vitamin C fame) writing in the daily paper in his more recent capacity as a scientist for peace refers not only to Armageddon, but is himself referred to as a Cassandra. When Indian actor Will Sampson criticized what he considered an inaccurate telefilm about his people, the reviewer in *Maclean's* could not resist the caption, "Sampson takes on the Philistines".

In the past year I have encouraged several classes to bring me clippings from popular magazines and newspapers and have found that they delight in turning up with articles that allude to Pharaoh, Pilate, and Adonis. They find quite illuminating the exploits of Apollo, the sensual influence of Aphrodite, and the lure of Calypso in the many diverse popular publications read by their families and friends. It is perhaps a chastening and deflating lesson to learn that one's own generation has not invented sex and that love as well as lust existed outside wedlock before our present teenagers were dreamed of. Lancelot and Guinevere are surely helpful here. The generation gap, so-called, may be lessened, and the decrease in ignorance and arrogance that often ensues can be nothing but salutary.

What Yolen has called the landscape of allusion is of course as essential for visual art and music education as it is for literature. Alas, with our emphasis on skill and performance, many a competent Grade 9 flutist has never heard of Pan and many a sweet-voiced school choir singer

knows not whereof she sings when she sings of Tristan and Isolde. Similarly, the student adept with oils and at the kiln may have no idea of the nymphs, satyrs, madonnas, and demons that his skill has the power to invoke. Understanding the landscape of allusion also helps young people gain familiarity with the shape of stories. Literature is made out of other literature or, as Yolen puts it, "stories lean on stories, art on art", and the form of the tale is as important to literature as the form of the sonata or fugue is to music.

Yolen sees the second function of myth, legend, and fairy tale as providing a way of "looking at another culture from the inside out".²⁵ In other words, we do not only go back to our cultural roots by connecting with our tales, we also become "familiar with the pantheon of Greek gods, who toy with human lives as carelessly as children at play".²⁶ This brings the Greek world view into focus. "If a child learns about the range of Norse godlings who wait for heroic companions to feast with them at Valhalla, then the Vikings' emphasis on battle derring-do makes more sense".²⁷ The group of stories that hang together to form a mythology makes it clear that anyone stuck within the confines of his own time and space cannot possibly see or experience even it. As Joseph Campbell points out, humans have always had "a long backward reach".²⁸

Studying the mythologies of Greece and the Bible helps us to see the perverted myths of contemporary advertising and to have some power over them. Getting away from it all and beating our path to what is probably a less and less rustic cottage in the north is not hard to see as a contemporary distortion of the golden longing within the human breast ever-and-always to get back to the garden and to recapture that lost paradise. In a witty article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Garrison Keillor indicates several new ways of interpreting old tales, and they shed great light

25. J. Yolen, *Touch Magic*, p. 16.

26. Ibid., p. 16.

27. Ibid., p. 16.

28. Ibid., p. 17.

upon modern advertising. (Last names are omitted to protect the identity of the characters.) Snow explains:

In trying to come to terms with myself, I've had to come to terms with my stepmother and her envy of my beauty, which made our relationship so destructive. She was a victim of the male attitude that prizes youth over maturity when it comes to women. Men can't dominate the mature woman, so they equate youth with beauty. In fact, she was beautiful, but the mirror (which, of course, reflected that male attitude) presented her with a poor self-image and turned her against me.²⁹

When people are terrified by age and the loss of a narrow and specific form of sexuality, myth and fairy tale can help in various ways. First, as in this retelling of the Snow White story, we see that the beautiful maiden and the old crone have always been with us – and as archetypes, not stereotypes. Even without the help of Robert Graves, however difficult he is to resist in this context, we can see that the ancient tales are full to the brim with insight concerning where real beauty resides. Several valuable new anthologies of stories where females have more important attributes than physical allurement and do not sit mooning that "some day my prince will come" are now available.³⁰ These tales are drawn from all cultures and are all retrieved from bygone times: they have simply been told, written, loved long since, and lost awhile. Their recovery reveals again the discrepancy between appearance and reality. These old tales rediscovered and shared are helping immensely to quench an ageless thirst. Tatterhood, for example, a young woman of action riding on goats, or sailing ships herself, has what the social scientists today would call, I suppose, "a relationship of mutuality". Told as the good yarn it is, the ideas are incarnate and we can dispense with the jargon. This is how

29. G. Keillor, "My Stepmother Myself", *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982, pp. 77-79. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

30. Such anthologies include E. Phelps, *The Maid of the North* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981); A. Lurie, *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1980); and T. MacCarty, *The Skull in the Snow and Other Folktales* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

the tale concludes, and a happy ending it is indeed:

At last Tatterhood said, "Aren't you going to ask me why I wear these ragged clothes?"

"No", said the prince. "It's clear you wear them because you choose to, and when you want to change them, you will."

At that, Tatterhood's ragged cloak disappeared, and she was clad in a velvet green mantle and kirtle.

But the prince just smiled and said, "The colour becomes you very well."

When the castle loomed up ahead, Tatterhood said to him, "And will you not ask to see my face beneath the streaks of soot?"

"That, too, shall be as you choose."

As they rode through the castle gates, Tatterhood touched the rowan wand to her face, and the soot streaks disappeared. And whether her face now was lovely or plain we shall never know, because it didn't matter in the least to the prince's brother or to Tatterhood.

But this I can tell you: the feast at the castle was a merry one, with the games, and the singing, and the dancing lasting for many days.³¹

Yolen, having remarked upon the "landscape of allusion" and the knowledge of ancestral cultures provided by making myth, legend, and fairy tale new in every age, proceeds undaunted to the more touchy, more controversial, less strictly rational, and, some would argue, most important functions of myth and tale. The first of these more elusive and complex functions is "myth conceived of as a symbolic form... a way of organizing the human response to reality".³² Myth in its simplest terms is story, and the shape of the myth helps us to narrate our own lives and the lives of our tribe, people, country, or planet. Narrative consciousness – an awareness that we are always putting experience in story form – comes to us in a direct line from mythology. We not only endow human experiences with shape, significance, causality, and direction, we use the symbolic language of myth to narrate our stories. Religions, nations, institutions, clubs, families, friends, lovers, and virtually all manner of

31. E. Phelps, ed., *Tatterhood and Other Tales* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1978), p. 6.

32. J. Yolen, *Touch Magic*, p. 17.

human groupings have their symbols and talismans to help them organize responses to the welter of impressions, images, and stimuli which assault us and with which we grapple daily. Our craving for meaning would go largely unsatisfied without the shapes and symbols provided by mythology.

The fourth function of myth, legend, and fairy tale which Yolen identifies is more closely linked to language in general and metaphor in particular. She says that “the great archetypal stories provide a framework or model for an individual’s belief system”. She stresses the importance of the symbolic, metaphoric language, which is then “honed by centuries of tongue-polishing to a crystalline perfection”.³³ The symbolic language is something that a young child seems to understand almost viscerally; metaphoric speech is the child’s own speech. We may know that indeed our sun neither rises nor sets, yet sunrise and sunset are so much part of our human metaphorical system that, oddly enough, television earnestly informs us in print and sound at precisely what time these events which do not occur can be expected to take place. Even in our greatest scepticism and cynicism we seem determined to keep trying to turn our strange environment into a home:

True myth will always serve as an inexhaustible source of intellectual speculation, religious joy, ethical inquiry, and artistic renewal. The real mystery is not destroyed by reason. The fake one is. You look at it and it vanishes. You look at the Blond Hero – really look – and he turns into a gerbil. But you look at Apollo, and he looks back at you The poet Rilke looked at a statue of Apollo and Apollo spoke to him. “You must change your life,” he said.

When the genuine myth rises into consciousness, that is always its message. You must change your life.³⁴

This fourth function remains a risky one and perhaps the one most amenable to distortion. Nevertheless, our exploration would therefore be incomplete without it.

33. Ibid., p. 18.

34. U. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, p. 77.

After painting a terrifying picture of children and, by implication, of the race itself deprived of mythology, art, and language and therefore unable to generalize or interpret experience, Yolen concludes with a more encouraging statement:

A child conversant with the old tales accepts them with an ease born of familiarity, fitting them into his own scheme of things, endowing them with new meaning. That old fossil, those old bones, walk again, and sing and dance and speak with a new tongue.³⁵

Some Suggestions for Using Enchantment

The pros and cons of picture book and film

The problems inherent in using innocent-looking and often exquisitely beautiful picture books may not be immediately apparent. Since these books appeal to us we are not likely to exercise caution in their use. Nevertheless, the picture book can be prescriptive as well as descriptive, and the child's first encounter with any myth, legend, or fairy tale is better told by the carefully rehearsed teacher with an occasional assist from a professional story-teller or simply read with respect from unadorned print. Thus no lid or limit is put on the imagination during this initial encounter. When the child sees picture books, it is wise to present at least two illustrations of the same tale.

I often suggest "blowing" the book budget for primary and junior grades on a dozen picture books of the same tale. Possessing at least two different visual interpretations safeguards the child's own initial imaginings. If there is only one pictorial version available, and it held in the hand of that all-knowing teacher, it must be "right" and my glorious pictures-in-my-head must be "wrong". If there are two renderings to view, then why not three? Why not mine as well? Why not, indeed?

³⁵ J. Yolen, *Touch Magic*, p. 20.

With all our writing about, and wrestling with, reader-response theory, we have been sluggish in examining the response to the visual impact of the illustrated tale. Do our first impressions simply get stuck in our imaginations? Hearing – not seeing – is surely the ideal way to enter the tale unencumbered and free to see and feel what is there.

Film, of course, has no responsibility to be “true to the story”. It is free to create something else instead. But what filmmakers do buy when they buy rights, as McLuhan pointed out, is the title.

Now most titles of myth, legend, and fairy tale are free for the asking, but I would, all things being equal, just as soon let a child form her or his own images of Moses before being assaulted by the extravaganza of *The Ten Commandments*. Even with a perceptive celluloid version such as, for example, *The Loon's Necklace*, I would prefer the experience of print to precede that of picture and, if at all possible, the human voice reaching human ears to come first of all.

The racist tale reconsidered

Perhaps because of our own mental sets, or even because of authorial intention, racism may appear in legend or folk tale. Rather than stripping books from the shelf or providing an index of tales to avoid, consider telling or reading the tale to a small group or the whole class and discussing the aspects that concern you. Nowhere is the skill of the teacher more important than when it comes to seeing a tale both in its own time, which may be a long time ago and far away indeed, and in our own time as well. Sometimes a legend with racist undertones or overtones may help us understand, and thus outgrow, an unexamined prejudice.

Expanding the boundaries of legends

One area of study that has become popular in Ontario schools is that of the legend and lore of Native peoples. Research is being conducted and collections are being feverishly compiled. Sometimes secondary school

students believe that "legend" is synonymous with "Native people's legends", and it is important both in the interest of the stories of Native people and for our students' own perception that Native literature be seen as very special to us, but also as part of the body of legends-at-large.

It is of course a fulfilling activity to use the legends of the "heritage" countries represented in any classroom. And a final plea for the Arthurian tales. While *The Boys' King Arthur* is an unfortunate title, the tales themselves make jolly good reading and are necessary for what Yolen calls the "landscape of allusion" as well as what John Hirsch, Jr., refers to as "cultural literacy".

Sexism laid bare – and low

Sexism in myth, legend, and fairy tale has been dealt with at length, but a final reminder is perhaps in order. There are many collections of ancient lore rediscovered in which strong females prevail and prosper; several were suggested earlier. If there is a balance to redress, these books are an immense help and have an authentic ring that is not to be found in much of the recently revised material.

In case the dire warnings of the danger to female self-esteem inherent in myths, legends, and fairy tales have any validity, it may be as well in the meantime to strike a balance between tales portraying strong female characters and those portraying strong males. It should be remembered, however, that there is infinitely more that is sexist in life than in art for present-day children and if one is alert to danger, it is wise to be sure where it is to be found.

Activities: glimpses into the obvious

I resist providing a list of activities that can be used in conjunction with the telling and reading of myth, legend, and fairy tale, but the strong and suggestive visual qualities of these stories combined with an easily identifiable and powerful story line make them naturals for drama, visual art, and music, or a combination of the three. For the "researchers" in the

class of Intermediate or Senior students, the tracing of a mythological character through the arts of the ages and into contemporary times is a splendid idea. If it “takes”, I have found that students will work much harder and longer on such a project than I should ever have presumed to suggest. Writing from a minor character’s point of view, updating the tale, writing scripts for performance, writing or taping in pairs, with partners taking opposite points of view – these are just a few of the possible ways of actively engaging children in reading and writing about myth, legend, and fairy tale.

Making connections

Children detect the connections between tales even without adult intervention. When a similarity is cited, discoveries seem to erupt everywhere and it is the wise teacher who encourages making connections without being outlandishly far-fetched.

It is interesting to note that, of all the arts, myth and fairy tale most easily bridge distances – between East and West and between old and young. The territory can never really be defined or defended. It is the home of the imagination where, for a few precious moments, we escape the confines of space and the tyranny of time. Providing young people with keys to what C. S. Lewis calls “other worlds” is no mean accomplishment.

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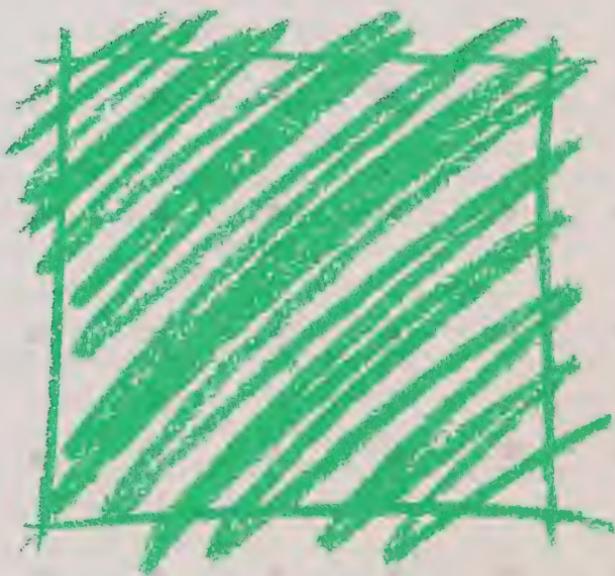
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Epilogue:

Life and Literature in the Classroom



Epilogue: Life and Literature in the Classroom

Lissa Paul

"It is all very well to identify connections between literature and life," you say, "but what does it have to do with stories in the classroom?" A great deal.

Stories enable us to find order and value in the incoherence of everyday events. The capacity to see the play of figure and ground (as in those silhouettes that are either two faces in profile, or a goblet, depending on how you look at them) can be developed. We can encourage children to establish links between literature (especially traditional literature) and everyday experience; and to make connections between pictures and words. Here are some ways to make those connections in the classroom.

Children flicker between the everyday landscape and the imaginary, between the stories they hear and those they create. Stories that stay with people tend to be about the real social and economic concerns of growing up, concerns about love and money, and about life and death.

The interesting parts of a story, the ones that make us think, are often the parts we really don't understand, or that give us conflicting messages. So when we look for gaps in the story, incomplete descriptions, or places where the pictures are in conversation with the words, we are actively engaged in determining the meaning of the text.

In *Rosie's Walk*, for instance, we can encourage children to explore, perhaps through role playing, the relationship between the threat of the fox and the obliviousness of the hen. Or we can talk about how the pictures and the words tell different stories – with the words playing straight-man to the slapstick comedy routine of the pictures; or about how Rosie and the fox resemble the cartoon characters Roadrunner and Coyote. This kind of reading makes visible both the connections between literature and life, and between pictures and words.

For older children, a comparison between the three illustrated versions of *Rapunzel* (for example, one by Felix Hoffman, first published in German in 1949;¹ one told and illustrated by Jutta Ash in 1982;² and one

1. J. Grimm and W. Grimm, *Rapunzel*, illustrated by Felix Hoffman (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

2. J. Grimm and W. Grimm, *Rapunzel*, illustrated by Jutta Ash (London: Andersen, 1982).

told by Barbara Rogasky and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman in 1982³ offers a more complex, more disturbing study of the relationships between words and pictures, and between literature and life. As with most fairy tales, the story itself is straightforward, and quite short. But the ethical issues it presents raise complex human questions about desire, theft, deceit, responsibility, punishment, justice, cruelty, and redemption.

Something very strange happens from version to version. The play of good and evil in the story depends very much on how the characters and setting are conveyed. Hoffman's version is the most conventional and traditional. He tells a story about thick, stolid-looking peasants who, because they desire food, are wrongly robbed of their child by an ugly giant of a witch. The witch is shown running off with the screaming baby Rapunzel tucked under her arm like so much lettuce. In the end, Rapunzel lives to establish her own family, and the witch is punished by an avenging bird who cuts her down to size (the size of "a shrivelled apple") and makes baby-bird food out of her.

Jutta Ash and Barbara Rogasky tell stories that are probably quite close to acknowledgement of the psychological truths of fairy tales and they make these truths tangible. Both treat the tale as a story about redemption – about growing up, being separated from one's mother and going out into the world. The witch in the 1982 versions subverts the stereotype of unjustly robbed parents and wicked witch. In fact, the witch almost seems to rescue Rapunzel – from a teenage mother who is not old enough to look after a baby. In the Rogasky/Hyman version, Rapunzel's mother is a child-like figure, so small that she has to stand on a stool to look out the window to see the rampion she wants so much. The witch, on the other hand, looks like a wise woman. What is most apparent in the comparison of the three versions of Rapunzel is that it is quite difficult to tell the story without imposing a positive or negative charge on the characters and events.

3. J. Grimm and W. Grimm, *Rapunzel*, retold by Barbara Rogasky and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman (New York: Holiday House, 1982).

When sharing books with children, look consciously and carefully at the words and pictures to determine the kind of story that is being told. Consider the landscape, for example: is it barren or lush? Does that alter the reader's response? Are Rapunzel's parents to be pitied for losing their child because of a minor theft? Or are they stupid and greedy? Does the witch really rescue Rapunzel and free the parents from the responsibility of looking after a child whom they are clearly too immature to look after? Is the witch a benign old grandmother? Or is she selfish and wicked? Should the witch be pitied for her desire to lock Rapunzel away from the world? Or should she be chastized? Does Rapunzel deceive the witch innocently or deliberately? Is Rapunzel a princess? Or a peasant? And what about the ending? Does the loss and blinding of the prince and the birth of Rapunzel's illegitimate babies constitute punishment for her crime of deceiving the witch? Or is she now redeemed and entitled to happiness? What does Rapunzel's hair have to do with all this? And what about the tower?

One way of opening up the story is to find the issues that intrigue you and your class – keeping your very particular set of social, cultural, religious, and ethical values always in mind. There are no easy answers. But the more carefully you listen to your students and the more attentive you are to where their interests lie, the better able you will be to enter a dialogue with them, to mediate between them and the story, and to connect stories with the human values of everyday life.

Children are not innocent. They share grown-up concerns, including the difficult ones of selfishness, choice, sacrifice, duty, and morality.

Even the very young children Gordon Wells describes in one of his transcripts are caught in the moment-to-moment working out of a life-and-death "Noah's Ark" scenario. These are not morbidly aberrant children. They know that the issue is survival.

A quick look at some of the most memorable moments in children's literature shows that stories about life and death are considered to be eminently suitable for children. *Little Women* is a story of little girls playing at mothers and funerals. *Charlotte's Web* is the story of the threatened death of a pig and the actual death of a spider. *Anne of Green Gables* is about love and death in the life of a lovable orphan. And the animal stories of Ernest Thompson Seton usually end with the (often violent) death of the protagonist.

To make connections in class between imaginative literature and the fundamental concerns of life, begin by finding a story that touches you. Then think about what makes it so powerful for you, what point in the story catches and holds your attention.

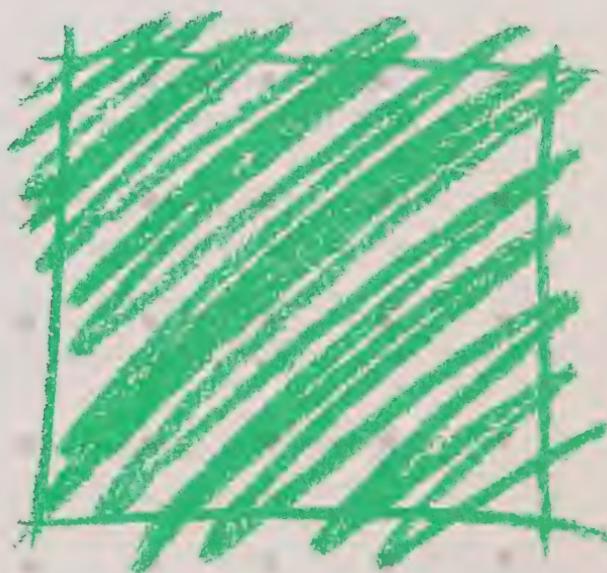
Try to match your own interests to those of the children in your class. Are they interested in contemporary fairy tales? Stories about super(wo)man heroes? Jack-the-Giant-Killer tricksters? Stories about knights-in-armour? If there are West Indian children in your class, you might tell some Ananse stories. Chinese children? Try some Chinese folk tales. Irish children? Irish fairy tales. But don't be too rigid about choosing tales to match cultural backgrounds of the children in your class. Sometimes a completely foreign or exotic culture is more attractive than a familiar one.

You might have students bring in a version of a familiar tale as told to them by someone from the "old country" (any "old" country will do). You might have them compare the same story – say "Cinderella" or "Little Red Riding Hood" – in contemporary and traditional versions. Or you might compare several different illustrated versions of one story, so

that the children can see how one story conjures up different pictures for different people. Or, like Johan Aitken, you might have students bring in references to myths, legends, or folk tales that appear in newspapers, advertising copy, magazines, and the like. In the end, these are only suggestions.

Read stories. That is the only important thing. And when you find one you like, share it with your class.

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